

O.V. Belova and G.I. Kabakova, ed. *U Istokov Mira: Russkie Etiologicheskie Skazki I Legendy* (*At the Origins of the World: Russian Etiological Tales and Legends*). Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute for Slavic Studies, 2013. Commentary. Archival Sources. Bibliography. Index. 530 pages.

This book has its origin in the volume of Russian etiological tales (*Contes et légendes de Russie*, Flies France, Paris 2005) that one of the authors, the French ethnologist Galina Kabakova, published in French within the Flies series *Aux origines du monde*. The series aims to fill a gap both for specialists and for general public, by presenting a vast and largely unknown realm: etiological tales and legends. Begun in 1998, the series, which today includes more than 30 titles, covers a great number of geographical areas, nearly the entire world, from Japan to Latin America, and thus offers a vast encyclopedia of different popular traditions.

The present volume of Russian etiological tales (in Russian) is the result of collaboration between Kabakova and her Russian colleague Olga Belova, a leading Moscow ethnologist and a specialist on etiological folklore. The texts are organized thematically; cosmogonic stories (creation of the world, origin of the seas, mountains, rivers, climate, etc.) are followed by stories explaining the origin of supernatural beings, animals, birds, insects and plants. This section culminates with the most important event, the creation of man, a plot basically derived from Genesis in these stories. Then follow tales related to the origins of races, languages, and religions. The last section presents stories about social organization, professions, everyday life, behavior and customs.

The book is more than twice as long as the French edition and it contains a number of important new texts, some of them never before published. However, the main difference is the book's outstanding scholarly commentary that features a significant number of variants for each given story, sources, bibliography, international ATU-index classification, and an index of themes and motifs. Last but not least, the book boasts an excellent introduction, essentially a comprehensive essay on the nature, structure and function of etiological tales.

A number of etiological stories may seem amazingly similar in different popular traditions, even those geographically remote from each other. The number of themes and motifs is relatively restricted. Many of them go back to the Bible as well or to various apocryphal Gospels, while still others can be traced back to non-Christian beliefs. One can argue that their value resides mainly in small variations in details in the stories and that even the absence of some of these features in a given tradition may be of significance to the scholar.

By comparing Russian etiological tales with tales from other geographical regions, the authors demonstrate that the stories share a universal fascination with the origin of the cosmos (the sun, the moon, the Earth and its form and composition) as well as of geographical entities. Other topics of interest to human life, namely the relations between the sexes and woman's physiology, social function and familial roles, feature prominently in the stories as well. Animals, including birds and insects, constitute another favorite topic. One can also see the importance of the calendar, which provides the means for comprehending and organizing time. A detailed index at the end of the book allows the scholar to compare the roles of these different elements to each other.

It goes without saying that elements of Christian belief are omnipresent in these Russian stories and even dominate the worldview reflected in these tales. As in many other traditions, it is basically a Manichean view: God and the devil share the world and fight for the right to control it,

a struggle that is usually presented as endless.

This edition of Russian etiological texts brings a rigorous scholarly approach to the question of these stories. In addition, it is an attractive volume, thanks to fine illustrations at the beginning of each new section. It offers delightful reading for general public and will be an invaluable source for ethnologists and folklore specialists.

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